



Committee on
HOMELAND SECURITY
Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

June 23, 2015

Media Contact: Susan Phalen
(202) 226-8477

Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Peter King (R-NY)
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

“Admitting Syrian Refugees: The Intelligence Void and the Escalating Homeland Security Threat”

Remarks as Prepared

For Americans, opening our doors to those who flee violence, war, and exploitation is part of who we are as a nation. America has a long and proud history of providing safe harbor for refugees. Refugees admitted to America include Congressman Tom Lantos (Hungary) and scientist Albert Einstein (Germany), among thousands more who have contributed to U.S. society. But we have also had refugees and asylum seekers take advantage of U.S. safe haven to plot and carry out attacks.

Over the last four years, the conflict in Syria has forced more than 3.9 million Syrians to flee their country, in large part due to the continued violence and savagery of ISIS, making this one of the world’s biggest refugee crises without an end in sight. This year, the U.S. is expected to admit several thousand Syrian refugees – a number only expected to rise over the next few years as well as almost 70,000 refugees from approximately 70 countries

We have heard open and closed testimony from government officials and security experts expressing concerns that terrorist groups may seek to use Syrian refugee programs as a gateway to carry out attacks in Europe and America. It is essential that we have a discussion of the humanitarian crisis and the security risks inherent in the process.

I agree that the vast majority of Syrian refugees do not have ties to terror groups. However, we have been reviewing the current security vetting procedures for a number of months, and I have a number of concerns, not the least of which is the lack of on-the-ground intelligence necessary to identify terror links.

With the lack of stable foreign governments, foreign intelligence agencies, military intelligence, U.S. embassy support, and access to human intelligence on the ground in Syria, the information and

intelligence that we are able to acquire regarding individuals who seek to enter the U.S. is limited, and often times unverifiable. This significantly degrades the quality and accuracy of our vetting process.

The U.S. has seen the danger of flawed refugee vetting, as well as the potential for refugees to be radicalized once they are in the U.S.

In 2011, I held a hearing into Islamist radicalization within the Somali-American community. This included the 20-plus cases of individuals, many refugees or children of refugees, who left the U.S. to join al Shabaab. Since that time, we have seen about a dozen other Somali-American youth join ISIS.

On May 25, 2011, two Iraqi refugees were arrested in Bowling Green, Kentucky and charged with conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals abroad; attempting to provide material support to terrorists and to al Qaeda in Iraq; and 21 other charges. According to a July 2011, news article (LA Times), the FBI was looking into potential terror ties for approximately 300 additional Iraqi refugees.

Other cases include the Blind Sheikh - Omar Abdel Rahman, 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef, Mir Aimal Kansi the 1997 CIA Headquarters shooter, and the Tsarnaev brothers.

While these bad actors represent only a small percentage of the total number of refugees in the U.S., we have to continuously monitor the changing the threat environment. In just the past 3 weeks, there have been at least 10 arrests by the FBI of U.S. individuals connected with ISIS and plotting attacks in the Homeland.

The online radicalization and calls by ISIS leadership for Islamists to carry out attacks in the U.S. are resonating with small pockets of U.S. society. There is little doubt that these calls for attacks are also resonating within the refugee community - both domestically and those still abroad. This doesn't mean that we should close our borders and not accept anyone, but we certainly need to be thoughtful and deliberative about the process and provide the American people with the most assurance that we are not importing terrorists.

There is no doubt that a number of significant improvements were made to the refugee vetting process in 2011, after the alarming cases involving several Iraqi refugees. At the same time, there has been procedural failures that resulted in the denial of refugee status for a number of Iraqi and Afghani nationals who put their lives on the line to help the U.S. during the military campaigns.

We have invited a distinguished panel of experts testifying today to assess the current threat environment, share their perspectives on refugee vetting and solicit their recommendations on what additional security measures should be considered.

###